FROM MICKEY MOUSE TO JESUS, THIS DRAGON'S CROWN TRAILER IS FULL OF EPIC HOMAGES

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By Richmond Lee

Watching the latest Dragon's Crown trailer I was delighted by the density of historical and pop cultural references they managed to sprinkle into every shot. Dragon's Crown is the latest game from Vanillaware, best known for Odin Sphere and Oboro Muramasa. Vanillaware is staffed by many ex-Capcom employees who worked on some of the best arcade games from back in the day, including Capcom's Dungeons and Dragons: Tower of Doom and Shadow Over Mystara (my favorite beat-em-up next to Capcom's Aliens vs Predator). Dragon's Crown is very much a spiritual successor to these games, but that's just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the vast array of influences at work in this title. Here's the trailer.

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Now let's go through shot by shot …

Walt Disney Presents …

The trailer opens up with a glowing fairy flying by the Atlus logo. This is an homage to the iconic Disney introduction where Tinkerbell flies by and sprinkles pixie dust on the Disney logo. This is the first of many Disney tributes to follow.

I believe this animation was originally made for Disney's first regular TV series, Disneyland which premiered in 1954 (predating the unveiling of the theme park of the same name which opened in 1955).

1959 Walt Disney Presents Disneyland Opening & Closing Theme
Watch on YouTube

Disney has been using new variations on this animation ever since.

The Landscapes of Pieter Bruegel

Next up the Vanillaware Logo is overlaid on top of a backdrop that recalls the landscapes of Flemish Renaissance painter, Pieter Bruegel. The castle reminded me of Bruegel's famous depictions of the Tower of Babel, which have provided inspiration to countless artists through the years. It's not a direct analog to Bruegel's Babel, however there is another castle at the very end of the trailer that is.

A similar spiraling tower also appears in Capcom's Dungeons and Dragons: Shadow Over Mystara, a game which George Kamitani, director of Dragon's Crown worked on.

While The Tower of Babel is very epic in scope, much of Bruegel's work was very warm and focused on the mundane aspects of peasant life which was very unusual for a European painter of his time. This tendency was carried on by his eldest son who also became an accomplished painter. The work of the Bruegels provide a great launch pad for any artist aspiring to depict a medieval village. Much of Vanillaware's background art is reminiscent of the paintings of the Bruegels.

Vanillaware art is always full of subtle authentic details

Greek Statuary

As the trailer continues the viewer is shown a dark corridor lined with Greek style statues of women. One of the figures recalls the statue of a wounded Amazon at The Met in New York.

The trailer continues with panning shots of more statues with strong Greek features.

Greek and Roman statues tend to have very strong nose bridges that go straight into the forehead

The shots of the crumbling corridor full of Greek style statues implies that parts of the game will involve exploring the ruins of even older civilizations. Intriguing!

Renaissance Portraits of the Rich and Famous

The trailer continues with a shot of a wealthy couple opulently dressed in Renaissance style garb. Each of them are brandishing a blue diamond, which could be an indication of royalty. The woman is holding a book, indicating a high level of education and refinement for the period. They look to be inside a castle overlooking a beautiful city. I am guessing that they will be your patrons on an important quest.

A good picture is worth a thousand words. There isn't a single arbitrary design decision in this whole image; everything is in place to convey the emotional state, personality, culture, social status and worldliness of the subjects.

Medieval Knights and Longswords

Next up is one of my favorite images from the trailer, a ghostly knight brandishing a scroll.

The Bottom Right photo belongs to Holly Hayes. Source: http://www.flickr.com/photos/sacred_destinations/2076001419/sizes/o/in/photostream/

He has been run through with a longsword wrapped in parchment with the message: HONESTA MORS TURPI VITA POTIOR. Translated from Latin, this means: An Honorable Death Is Better Than A Vile Life. His cape pin has a spade insignia (the strongest suite) and his helmet has a crown, both indicating royalty. As with almost everything in Dragon's Crown, the ghostly knight's proportions are hyper stylized, but the execution and details are very authentic. The style of longsword depicted here was first developed in England in the 1300s and primarily used by knights during the early days of the 100 Years War. By the 1500s it had fallen out of use on the battlefield, but continued to be popular as a weapon of sport and knightly duels. Perhaps this is the spirit of a great knight or even a king felled during a time of war.

Angels, Pomegranates and The Sacred Heart of Jesus

The supernatural imagery continues with a putto (a babyish angel or Cupid often mistakenly referred to as a "cherub" in modern times) holding a heart descending upon a desiccated corpse laid upon an altar draped in a funerary shroud.

The supine figure strongly recalls the beautiful Rococo sculpture The Veiled Christ by Giuseppe Sanmartino after a design by Antonio Corradini (who was initially commissioned for the piece but did not live to see its completion). This is one of the great works of western art and depicts the lifeless body of Jesus detailed with incredible sensitivity. The angel is holding a heart, perhaps recalling the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a Catholic devotion that originated in the middle ages. My friend and scholar Melvin originally mistook the heart for a pomegranate, a Christian symbol of resurrection. There are many classical paintings of The Christ Child holding pomegranates, symbolizing his future resurrection and the promise of eternal life. I'm willing to bet that this imagery is not lost on the folks at Vanillaware and this image will somehow tie into how you resurrect your characters in Dragon's Crown should they die.

Franciscan Friars

Continuing with the Christian imagery, the next character introduced is a man who is dressed very similarly to a Franciscan Friar, an order of monks founded in the 13th century. He looks to be holding a bible and has a statue of a figure that strongly resembles the Virgin Mary tied around his neck.

The Crusades

The Christian references continue with the next character, a hulking knight dressed like a medieval Christian Crusader. His chest is emblazoned with a lion in the "rampant" pose, the most aggressive posture of the traditional European heraldry signs. I wonder if he was based off of the knight at the end of Indiana Jones And The Last Crusade? Their faces are very similar.

Conan The Barbarian

If you love Fantasy books and movies, then this next character needs no introduction. This mountain of a man is the spitting image of Arnold Schwarzenegger in his breakout role as Conan The Barbarian!

Trivia: the original script for the film Conan The Barbarian had Conan fighting mutant animal human hybrids, not unlike the classic pig-faced orcs lying defeated in the background of this image.

Conan the Barbarian put Arnold on the map and kicked off the Sword and Sorcery craze of the 80s leaving an incredibly deep impression on the young medium of videogames. The first Conan film is legitimately great. Penned and directed by John Milius (who also wrote the "all time great" film Apocalypse Now), it is one of the most iconic films out there–one of my absolute favorites. It was based on a series of short stories by Robert E Howard. The books are awesome and I enthusiastically recommend them to any fan of Fantasy or Literature (with a capital L!) in general. They may surprise you. Conan is one of the smartest characters I've ever encountered in fiction.

Frazetta Style Sorceress

You can't have Swords and Sorcery without a buxom sorceress! This next character looks very much like a classic Frank Frazetta vixen.

Update: 5/13/2013 - Thanks to Hayato for pointing out that Frank Frazetta's Sorceress was painted in 1994

She is dressed very similarly to Princess Teegra from the 1983 film, Fire and Ice, a collaboration between Frank Frazetta and Ralph Bakshi, a luminary of alternative American animation. Her pose and demeanor are much more fierce though, and recall Frazetta's paintings of femme fatale sorceresses.

Mickey Mouse!

This is flat out one of my favorite homages in anything I've ever seen. This enthusiastic little fellow is a tribute to Mickey Mouse from the Sorcerer's Apprentice segment of Disney's Fantasia.

They're both wearing the same iconic, pointy wizard's cap and the warmly lit stairwell in the back is an especially nice touch.

Nike of Samothrace

Next we're treated to another great icon of Western Art, The Nike of Samothrace (also called "The Winged Victory).

It's speculated that this statue was originally made to commemorate a great naval victory.

The Films of Ray Harryhausen

The trailer continues with a collage of monsters straight out of the films of Ray Harryhausen, a titan in the world of special effects. As a child, Harryhausen saw King Kong (1933) and instantly fell in love with the "model animation" techniques used to bring its fantastic creatures to life. From that point on, Harryhausen dedicated his life to creating stop motion films that brought creatures and worlds only that only previously existed in imagination into the material world of film.

Harryhausen was very inspired by the burgeoning field of Science Fiction literature and was actually a close lifelong friend of another cultural titan, Ray Bradbury. Try to imagine a time when the terms "Visual Effects," "Stop Motion" and "Sci-Fi" where not part of the vernacular. The work of Ray Harryhausen was crucial in bringing those concepts to a wide audience. From the 1940s through the 1990s Ray Harryhausen was responsible for some of the most fantastic and iconic creatures ever to grace a silver screen. These monsters left an indelible mark on film and surely inspired generations of game artists and developers as well. Mr Harryhausen, Vanillaware salutes you!

First up is that most humble of videogame foes, the killer skeleton. It's absolutely ubiquitous today, but in 1958 when The 7th Voyage of Sinbad hit theaters in the US it was a totally novel concept.

The 7th Voyage Of Sinbad (1958) - Trailer
Watch on YouTube

Sinbad would go on to become a sleeper hit (it's score by famous Hitchcock collaborator, Bernard Herman, is considered one of the best in film history and also undoubtedly influenced many early videogame sound tracks), but the skeleton warrior would make a huge splash several years later when it reappeared (and multiplied!) in Jason and the Argonauts (1963), one of Harryhausen's more critically and commercially successful films and his personal favorite of the bunch.

The scene where Jason fights the group of skeletons, with its intricate, near seamless interaction of live action and animation elements, is considered a defining moment in the history of VFX.

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This clip does not contain the original audio track, but it sure is cool.

Talos, the Bronze Giant

The next Harryhausen creature to appear is Talos, a giant animated bronze statue that also appears in Jason and the Argonauts.

Dragons Crown homage to Talos the greek bronze statue from Ray Harryhausen's 1963 film Jason and the Argonauts

In Greek mythology, Talos was a giant man made out of bronze who was created by Zeus to protect Europa, the first Queen of Crete (and his lover who he had stolen away while disguised as a white bull). Europe takes its name after her.

Harryhausen's version of Talos was inspired by classical depictions of the Colossus of Rhodes, one of the 7 Wonders of the Ancient World.

Engraving by Marten van Heemskerck 1498-1574

Medussa

Medussa is another iconic monster that Ray Harryhausen helped to define in the global consciousness with his 1981 film Clash of the Titans.

Vanillaware Dragon's Crown homage to Ray Harryhausen's Medusa from his 1981 film Clash of the Titans

In Greek mythology, Medussa was a Gorgon, a monstrous female creature often depicted with sharp fangs and snakes for hair who could turn men to stone with her fierce gaze.

The earliest depictions of gorgons show them as women with scary faces, often adorning temples in order to protect them from harm.

Ancient Greeks depicted Gorgons and Medusa as women with fierce frightening faces that could turn people to stone

In AD 8, the Roman poet Ovid completed the epic, The Metamorphosis, which introduced the idea that Medusa had once been an incredibly beautiful maiden before being cursed and transformed into a horrible monster. However artists had already been depicting Medusa with a classically beautiful face as early as the 4th or 5th Century BC.

The Medusa Rondanini. This is a roman copy of a Greek statue dating from either the 4th of 5th century that is considered to be the oldest known "beautiful gorgoneion."

By the Renaissance onward this became the new norm for Medusa.

Ray Harryhausen returned Medusa to her roots depicting her as grotesque monster. As far as I know, it was Ray Harryhausen who first designed her with the lower body of a snake and other heightened reptilian features such as scaly skin and a rattler. Vanillaware plays off of this convention and even adds a striped pattern to her scales similar to that of a timber rattlesnake, though they've chosen to maintain the attractive face preferred by most classical painters.

The monsters called out in this trailer represent just a small fraction of Ray Harryhausen's oeuvre. Ray Harryhausen is one of the most important fantasy artists of the last century and his visual legacy lives on in countless films and videogames. To learn more about Ray Harryhausen please visit his official website.

The Rosetta Stone

Amidst the montage of Harryhausen creatures, we get a brief glimpse at an ancient looking black tablet that recalls The Rosetta Stone, a fragment of an ancient Egyptian stele (an upright stone slab inscribed with important information) of incredible historical importance. The Rosetta Stone was uncovered in 1799 by soldiers in Napoleon's army who were digging the foundation for a fort in the port city of Rashid, Egypt, also known as Rosetta. The stone provided the key for researchers to decipher ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, a language which at the time had been dead for over a millenium.

The Rosetta Stone was unique because it was inscribed with a decree from King Ptolemy V in 3 separate scripts: Hieroglyphics (the language of the priests), Demotic (the language of every day life) and Greek (the language of government). Over a period of 2 decades, by comparing the hieroglyphics to the other scripts, which were better understood, researchers were finally able to crack the code of the ancient Egyptian script which adorned so many cultural treasures, but had been out of use since the fourth century AD.

The appearance of the Rosetta Stone look-alike in Dragon's Crown is intriguing. Although the game is set in the past, the arcane tablet looks to be some kind of relic of an even older mega civilization that's long gone. Much of the game will involve adventuring through ancient ruins looking for treasure.

Greater Demons and the Legacy of Princess Crown

Later in the trailer, the characters are shown battling a gigantic demon that looks like a buffed up version of the Greater Demon from Princess Crown, the progenitor of all Vanillaware games.

Princess Crown was directed by George Kamitani and was released for the Sega Saturn in 1997. The title of Dragon's Crown is an homage to Princess Crown, a fantastic game that was much ahead of its time.

Princess Crown featured the lush puppet style animation pioneered by Vanillaware and currently popular in many indie games and Flash based games, yet it was made years before Adobe Flash even existed. Princess Crown was ported to PSP in 2005, but unfortunately neither version of the game has ever received an official release outside of Japan.

Princess Crown (Saturn) Gameplay
Watch on YouTube

The game had an incredibly progressive story, starring a young Queen named Gradriel who takes up the sword to protect her kingdom from supernatural evil, just as her mother, the legendary hero, had done years before. The game (much like Odin Sphere) actually plays out as a series of books within the game. In this case it is being read by a grandmother to her granddaughter.

Recently there has been an outcry among gamers for a Zelda game starring Zelda. George Kamitani essentially made that game 16 years ago! This was the first story he ever penned when he was at the helm! But more on that in a future post!

Back to the Demon!

As you can see, the Greater Demon in Dragon's Crown shares the same basic design as the one in Princess Crown. Both have bleached bone skull heads on top of muscular, fleshy blue bodies with proportionally small wings and a bony tail. The newer Greater Demon has a significantly more muscular build perhaps taking cues from another boss from Princess Crown, Evil Leon. He also has long horns and more pronounced tusks, much like the final boss of Princess Crown, the Dark God Larva.

My internet buddy Hayato has pointed out that this demon also makes an appearance in Grand Knights History, Vanillaware's strategy RPG for PSP which also never saw an official release outside of Asia.

As you can see this version of the Greater Demon is much closer to the one found in Dragon's Crown. I guess this is a recurring character!

All these demons were also very likely influenced by the Dark Warrior, a boss character from Capcom's 1993 arcade brawler Dungeon's and Dragons: Tower of Doom, a game on which George Kamitani was a main designer.

The Greater Demon in both Dragon's Crown and Princess Crown emerges from a summoning circle, also known as a pentacle.

This is a reference to The Lesser Key of Solomon, a 17th Century textbook of magic (also known as a grimoire) written from the perspective of King Solomon, which gave instructions on how to summon spirits through seals, incantations and other rituals.

Vanillaware built an entire game around this subject in their 2007 RTS game, Grimgrimoire.

That's all for today, but there's still much to cover in this trailer. Keep your eyes peeled on for more updates from Art-Eater on Facebook and Twitter as we look deeper into the world of Dragon's Crown. Thanks for reading!

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